

The Evansville Press Metro

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Budding stars see themselves through stage

By Sandra Knipe
Entertainment reporter

"The Seven Little Piglets and the Four Soul Wolves" may not be ready for Broadway, but the young actors and actresses who scripted the soulful version of "The Three Little Pigs" may be headed there someday.

And whether or not they're Broadway-bound, the students in a summer acting class sponsored by the Community Action Program of Evansville appear to have learned something about theater and about themselves.

Although enrollment originally was limited to 20, about 50 children and teenagers have been taking the classes, taught by Repertory People of Evansville director Jim Jackson and his son Stephen.

It's the second year for the program, the brainchild of CAPE executive director Alice Weathers and Jim Jackson, who is in CAPE's Senior Aide program. This year's students range in age from 6 to 16, are from both low and higher income families and are about evenly mixed racially.

"At the first class, the black kids sat on one side of the theater and the white kids on the other," said Stephen Jackson. "I told them theater people are all the same color."

At a recent class held in the RPE theater on the second floor of the Old Courthouse, a short play written by students became an unpretentious lesson in brotherhood.

In the sketch, a young black mother admonished her five squabbling children — three black and two white — about sharing. Afterward, all six joined hands to face the audience and sing "You're My Brother, You're My Sister." As the audience joined in the song, every child in the theater appeared to know the words.

"If we could keep the children and get rid of the adults, there would be no more wars. There is no hatred in these children," said Jim Jackson.

The acting students are divided between two classes, each of which meets for three hours twice a week.

"Three hours gets a little long for the instructors, but the kids never want to leave," said Jim Jackson. His words were born out at the end of the morning session. As quitting time approached, some students pleaded for a chance to show their teachers a new sketch they'd been working on, while others asked to repeat a skit they'd had some trouble with.

"These kids really want to entertain, and there's some real talent in here. They'll knock you out," Jim Jackson said. "They write their own scripts and we structure them. Then they act them out with real emotion."

When they weren't looking for snacks (CAPE furnishes refreshments for each session), the students at the morning session mostly were in a mood for comedy — beginning with the aforementioned rap version of "The Three Little Pigs."

"We're gonna huff and puff and blow your house down. We're gonna blow your house right down to the ground. We're gonna blow it downtown," rapped the four soul wolves in the updated fairy tale. Like the three little pigs, however, the seven little piglets had the last laugh.

"One of the little kids wanted to do 'The Three Little Pigs,' but we needed more characters, so we thought up 'The Seven Little Piglets and the Four Soul Brothers,'" said Kalier Howard, one of the wolves in the sketch.

Kalier, 14, moved here this summer from Chicago. One of the few members of the class with stage experience, she had roles in "Children's Voices" and "West Side Story" at St. Catherine of Genoa, her Chicago school.

"We did shows in Chicago, but I was never taught things like the different stages. It seems to me I've learned more here than I did there," said Kalier.

That was good news for Jim Jackson, who expected his lectures to run a poor second to the students' desire to perform. He also seemed happily surprised by how much some of his young charges had retained from those lectures.

During an oral quiz, the stu-



By Daniel R. Patmore

LINE ON LINES — Stephen Jackson of the Repertory People of Evansville coaches Esther Pullom, 10, at left, and Dede Lawrence, 15, through their lines in a summer acting class sponsored by the Community Action Program of Evansville.

dents were able to define "proscenium arch," name the three eras of theater (ancient, Shakespearean and contemporary), and discuss the merits of the emotional school of acting versus the technical school.

"With all the heart we have in here, we think we're more of the emotional school," Jim Jackson said.

Under their teacher's coaching, they also decided they were character actors as opposed to personalities.

"You'll work longer that way," he told them.

Asked what else they've learned, the students mentioned stage positions and areas, how to cross the stage and how to breathe properly "so we can project." ("Project" and "loud-er" were words they heard often during the three-hour session.)

Many of the answers came from 13-year-old Philip Lawrence, who said his father had acted in an RPE production of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

"I listen a lot because that's the only way I can learn," said Philip, who comes to the class with his sister Dede, 15, and his brother Shane, 11.

"At first I didn't want to come, but as soon as I came, I liked it," said Shane.

While the audience sometimes must be hushed during skits, silence reigned when Dede, one of several members of the C.K. Newsome Community Choir enrolled in the class, sang "The Greatest Love of All" during a break from the sketches.

Another experienced singer, 10-year-old Esther Pullom, who was featured in the Encore Dinner Theatre's Mother's Day program, said her father signed her and her niece up.

"He said it would help me use my hands and emotions," Esther said. "It's great experience and it's fun."

The other children joined the classes for a variety of reasons — some at the urging of parents or grandparents, some

because their older siblings were coming, many because it sounded like fun.

"My mom wanted me to be because I couldn't talk loud enough," said Paul Brazzle, 14, a budding comedian who wrote his own material for a news-cast. Lines such as "Vanna White wants to marry Michael Jackson, but all he can say is 'Beat It,'" were rewarded with gales of laughter from his fellow students.

Sharon Cates, 12, will be in drama class next year at North Posey Junior High School and hopes the RPE instruction will help her make higher grades. Also enrolled in the class are her 6-year-old sister Amanda and brother David, 9, and their friends Jeremy Toton, 10, his brother, Jason, 7, and Brandy Neal, 8, who are all driven over from Posey County by Sharon's mother.

Kendra Jackson, 12, who so- loed during "You're My Brother," enjoyed last summer's class so much that she was back for more, and Desiree

Johnson, 14, is getting prepared to audition for the musicals at North High School, where she will be a freshman.

Nine-year-old inseparable friends Heidi Gish (a distant relative of actress Lillian Gish, Jim Jackson said) and Jessica Winterman disagreed about whether being on stage made them nervous. Heidi said "yes." Jessica said "no." But they both said they were having fun.

"When you're home and it's all boring and there's nothing to do, you can come on down to drama," said Regina Butler, 12.

"Probably the most funnest time is snacks," said Paul, the comedian.

The acting classes will demonstrate what they have learned at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday in the RPE Theater on the second floor of the Old Courthouse. The program, while primarily for the families of the students, is free to the public — although the young actors may be collecting donations for a post-performance pizza party.



Repertory People of Evansville, Inc.

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